United Arab Emirates

Freedom of the Press

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continued its efforts to silence dissent in 2013, convicting scores of activists and bloggers and further limiting an already constrained media environment. While the constitution provides for freedom of speech, the government uses its judicial, legislative, and executive powers to limit those rights in practice. UAE Federal Law No. 15 of 1980 for Printed Matter and Publications regulates all aspects of the media and is considered one of the most restrictive press laws in the Arab world. It authorizes the state to censor both domestic and foreign publications prior to distribution, and prohibits criticism of the government, rulers and ruling families, and friendly foreign governments. The law also bans publication of information that "causes damage to the national economy." Violations of the law can result in fines and prison sentences.

Defamation is a criminal offense, although there have been no defamation-related prison sentences handed out since 2007. Journalists can also be prosecuted under the penal code and a cybercrime law that was tightened in 2012. In a major case in 2011, blogger Ahmed Mansoor and four other Emirati activists were arrested and charged under Articles 8 and 176 of the penal code for allegedly insulting the leaders of the UAE in posts on the internet forum UAEHewar. In November 2011, Mansoor received a three-year prison sentence, while the others received sentences of two years each in a trial widely criticized by international human rights groups. The day after their conviction, the five men were pardoned by the president and released. However, as a result of their criminal records, they are unable to obtain certain documents necessary for professional and academic pursuits in the UAE, and were denied access to their confiscated property and passports into 2012. Mansoor was also attacked physically on several occasions in 2012 and continues to be subject to close government surveillance.

The Cybercrime Law criminalizes the use of the internet to commit a range of offenses—including violating political, social, and religious norms—and subjects perpetrators to prison terms and fines. In November 2012, the highly restrictive law was tightened through a presidential decree without consultation. Although the law centers on information technology, it has detrimental implications for both traditional journalism published online and citizen journalism. Article 24 makes it a crime to use a computer network to "damage the national unity or social peace." Article 28 of the law states that the publication or dissemination of information, news, or images deemed "liable to endanger security and its higher interests or infringe on the public order" could be punished with imprisonment and a fine of up to 1 million dirhams ($270,000). Under Article 29, "deriding or harming the reputation, stature, or status of the state, any of its institutions, its president or vice president, the rulers of the emirates, their crown princes or their deputies," as well as a number of national symbols, is also punishable with imprisonment and a fine of the same amount. Article 41 makes it legal for the government to close websites related to the commission of the crimes. The government charged several people with violating the cybercrime law in 2013. During the high-profile trial of 94 Emirati citizens who were accused of plotting a coup due to their criticisms of the government and vocal support for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, numerous observers and commentators were arrested and prosecuted under the cybercrimes law for their criticisms of the trial. Waleed al-Shehhi was arrested after tweeting observations and criticisms from the courtroom. Al-Shehhi was charged and convicted under the cybercrime law and sentenced to two years in prison and fined $137,000. Another Emirati, Abdullah al-Haddidi, was charged under the Penal Code for tweeting about the trial. He was sentenced to 10 months in prison, which was augmented by provisions in the cybercrimes law designating use of the internet as an aggravating factor in crimes. The trial ended in July with the conviction of 69 of the accused, a verdict that

international observers widely criticized. International media were barred from attending the trial, while the local media took a progovernment stance. Also in 2013, the UAE security forces arrested eight people for uploading a video to YouTube that poked fun of youth culture in Dubai. They were charged with violating the cybercrime law's provision against "defaming the image of United Arab Emirates society abroad." The men—including two Emiratis and an American—received prison sentences and fines after conviction in December 2013.

The National Media Council (NMC), created in 2006, is responsible for licensing all publications and issuing press credentials to editors. Members of the council are all appointed by the president. The UAE has four media free zones (MFZ)—areas in which foreign media outlets produce print and broadcast material intended for foreign audiences—located in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaimah, and Fujairah. Although these areas are subject to UAE media laws, the press operates with relative freedom. The Dubai and Abu Dhabi MFZs house bureaus of high-profile media outlets such as the U.S.-based Cable News Network (CNN), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya, and Agence France-Presse. Broadcast media outlets based in the MFZs are regulated by the Technology and Media Free Zone Authority, but are also subject to the 1980 press law and the penal code. All free zones must obtain approval from the NMC before licensing any print or broadcast activities.

Journalists, especially foreign journalists working for UAE-based media outlets, have reported having their stories censored by their editors, particularly if they are covering sensitive issues such as religion, politics, or foreign allies of the UAE. Online censorship is extensive, although the government claims that it only censors pornographic sites. The UAE regularly blocks access to websites, particularly Arabic-language political sites such as the U.S.-based *Al-Watan*, a popular news site in the Arab world that receives 120,000 hits per day. The country appears more willing to block Arabic-language sites, leaving English-language sites unfettered in order to burnish its liberal image. In 2013, the government attempted to persuade a German hosting company to shut down *Al-Watan*. Users are directed to a proxy server that maintains a list of banned websites and blocks material deemed inconsistent with the "religious, cultural, political, and moral values of the country." Websites that are considered indecent include those featuring pornography, dating or personal advertisements, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) content. Some websites based in Israel or covering religions other than Islam, notably the Baha'i faith, are also blocked. The authorities have threatened to restrict use of encrypted e-mail and messaging services, which could facilitate government surveillance of journalists.

Due to vaguely defined red lines on permissible speech, extreme forms of self-censorship are widely practiced, particularly regarding issues such as local politics, culture, religion, or any other subject the government may deem sensitive. Emirati journalists often face warnings and threats if they push the limits of permissible media coverage. However, noncitizen journalists account for the overwhelming majority of those working in the UAE, and they face harsher measures, including dismissal and deportation. In June 2012, Ahmed Abd al-Khaleq, a blogger documenting the plight of his fellow stateless residents, or *bidoon*, was deported to Thailand after his residency documents were confiscated by UAE authorities. Ahmed Mansoor, the blogger who was released and pardoned by the president at the end of 2011, faced physical attacks by unknown assailants in late 2012. He also reported that his computer was hacked.

About a dozen newspapers are published in Arabic and English in the UAE, as well as several radio stations and terrestrial television stations. Most media outlets are either government owned or have close government affiliations. The Arab Media Group and Dubai Media Incorporated operate as the Dubai government's media arm, publishing several newspapers and operating television and radio stations. Privately owned newspapers such as the Arabic daily *Al-Khaleej* and its English-language sister paper, *Gulf Today*, are heavily influenced by the government. Almost all Arabic-language broadcast media that target the domestic audience are state owned and provide only the official view on local issues. However, satellite television service is widespread and provides uncensored access to international broadcasts.

Most major papers receive government subsidies and rely predominantly on the official Emirates News Agency (WAM) for content and guidance on whether or how to cover sensitive local news. According to one estimate, only about 10 percent of working journalists in 2010 were native Emiratis. Observers note that expatriate journalists with relatively good pay have little reason to engage in risky critical or investigative journalism. In 2010, the NMC-supported Journalist Association allocated 1 million dirhams for training and developing Emiratis' capacity in the field.

About 88 percent of the UAE population had regular access to the internet in 2013. There are two internet service providers, Etisalat and Du, both of which are owned and operated by state corporations. Despite broad restrictions, a majority of news consumers in Dubai rely on the internet, including blogs and news forums, to obtain information, according to the Dubai Press Club's *Arab Media Outlook 2009–2013 report. The UAE has* an extremely high mobile-telephone penetration rate, making such devices one of the most popular ways to receive news content.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

76

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

25

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

28

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

23